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HUMAN RIGHTS QUESTIONS: HUMAN RIGHTS SITUATIONS AND REPORTS OF SPECIAL RAPPORTEURS AND REPRESENTATIVES

Letter dated 1 June 1995 from the Permanent Representative of Croatia to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General

In accordance with instructions from my Government, I wish to inform you of the extremely grave situation of the Roman Catholic populations in the Banja Luka region of the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the occupied Croatian territory of Eastern Slavonia, as well as in Serbia. There have been serious human rights violations, including attacks on Catholic clerics as well as the remaining Catholics in these regions, who are predominantly ethnic Croats. Presented below is a list of some of the most serious violations committed during the month of May 1995, by region.

Diocese of Banja Luka (Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina)

4 May, Bosanski Aleksandrovac and Nova Topola: Roman Catholic nuns are kidnapped and expelled from these two historic Catholic convents.

5 May, Vujnovici: Catholic church is set afire and burned down.

6 May, Petricevac (suburb of Banja Luka): Serbian paramilitary forces maltreat Franciscan friars and nuns and then use explosives to destroy a Franciscan monastery and church. This action results in the death of Alojz Atlija, an elderly disabled priest. Afterwards, the remaining priests and nuns are expelled.

Night of 6/7 May, Sargovac: The Catholic church is totally demolished.

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7 May, Trn: The parish priest, Father Blaz Markovic, is badly mistreated.

Night of 7/8 May, Majdan (environs of Mrkonjic Grad): The sole remaining Catholic church in this area is burned down.

12 May, Presnacani: The Catholic church "Saint Theresa of the Child of God" is destroyed and the rectory is burned down. The burned bodies of parish priest, Father Filip Lukenda, and Sister Cecilija Pave Grgic are later recovered.

13 May, Motike: The bell-tower of the Catholic church is demolished by explosives, causing severe damage to the bell-tower and church.

Night of 14/15 May, Motike: An elderly Bosnian Croat couple, Franjo Grgic (65) and Zlata Grbic (64) are brutally murdered in their home.

17 May, Trn: Two men arrived in evening hours, pointed a gun at the parish priest, tied and robbed him and maltreated Sister Danica who was also present.

18 May, Trn: The Catholic church is blown up with explosives and the church centre burned down.

Since the beginning of May this year, Bosnian Serb paramilitaries have destroyed six Roman Catholic churches, one monastery and one rectory and have caused the deaths of two priests and one nun. Since 1991, in the Diocese of Banja Luka, tens of thousands of Catholics have been expelled, over 400 have been murdered, 4 priests have been killed, 41 churches and 3 monasteries destroyed and 32 churches damaged. To date, 81 per cent of the Bosnian Croat and 82 per cent of the Bosnian Muslim pre-war population have been ethnically cleansed in the region. It must be pointed out that this area was not the scene of any military operations, nor did the Croat and Muslim populations offer any resistance to the Bosnian Serb authorities.

The city of Banja Luka is in the process of becoming an ethnically pure Serbian city although Serbs have historically been a minority there. According to the official census of 1948, the city of Banja Luka had 31,228 inhabitants: 10,861 Serbs (34.8 per cent), 9,951 Muslims (31.9 per cent) and 8,662 Croats (27.7 per cent).

Province of Vojvodina (Serbia)

4 May, Hrtkovci: The Catholic church is plundered and set afire.

5 May, Bac: A cross on a Roman Catholic church is destroyed.

5 May, Surcin: One cross and 12 tombstones are destroyed in a Catholic cemetery.

19 May, Srijemska Mitrovica: A bomb is thrown into the courtyard of the Catholic church.

21 May, Vasica (near Sid): The Catholic church is completely destroyed in an explosion.

The above represents a continuation of the policy of the Belgrade authorities of ethnically cleansing the province of Vojvodina and transforming it into a purely Serbian province. Since 1991, close to 40,000 ethnic Croats and 50,000 ethnic Hungarians have been driven out or forced to move from the province. It should be noted that ethnic Croats in Vojvodina are an autochthonous people who have been living there together with other nationalities for centuries.

Eastern Slavonia (occupied Croatia)

Early May, Ilok: During religious services, a group of Serbs enters the Catholic church, beats and harasses the parishioners and places the only remaining Roman Catholic priest in the region, Father Marko Malovic, under house arrest.

17 and 18 May, Bapska, Tovarnik, Sarengrad and Ilok: Over 500 elderly Croats are expelled and forced to march over the Danube river to Serbia, where they are held in inhumane conditions and isolated in the town of Morovic.

The above-mentioned actions by the Serb authorities and paramilitary forces no doubt represent a cowardly reaction to the successful military operation by Croatian forces that liberated Western Slavonia. However, the fact that Catholic clerics, churches and symbols have been the target of such actions leads to the conclusion that the recent anti-Catholic campaign by the Belgrade authorities has certainly contributed to such behaviour.

This campaign against the Catholic Church in Croatia is evidenced by a proliferation of letters and "memoranda" that have been circulated as documents of the General Assembly by the representative of "Yugoslavia" to the United Nations. In these documents, the Catholic Church in Croatia is accused of forcibly converting "10,000" Serbian children to Catholicism.

It is no surprise that these outrageous fabrications have not been confirmed by the Special Rapporteur of the Commission on Human Rights, Mr. Tadeusz Mazowiecki, or by any United Nations human rights body or any recognized human rights organizations. However, such malicious fabrications have no doubt stirred anti-Catholic sentiments among the ethnic Serb population in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and the occupied territories in Croatia, helping to cause the tragic consequences listed above.

The Republic of Croatia is deeply disturbed by the fact that human rights agenda items of the General Assembly are being used to deluge the United Nations diplomatic community with information that is not designed to foster the cause of human rights but rather to spread disinformation and to sow the seeds for interreligious hatred and intolerance.

This is all the more disturbing because documents are circulated that are stated to originate from the Government of the "Federal Republic of Yugoslavia". It should be noted that, in resolution 47/1, the General Assembly stated that "the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (Serbia and Montenegro) should apply for membership in the United Nations". Obviously, a State that should apply for membership is not considered to be a State Member of the United Nations.

Therefore, the situation exists whereby a non-member State is allowed to circulate an endless stream of documents filled with disinformation that have had the result of stirring up hatred and religious intolerance.

I would kindly request your assistance in distributing this letter as a document of the General Assembly under item 114 (c) of the preliminary list.

(Signed) Mario NOBILO
Permanent Representative